

Case Study

Bringing Order to a Disorganized Service

One of a series of reports of the results of Clarion projects, illustrating ways in which dining and hospitality services are improved and new opportunities to increase value are created. Names and identifying details are omitted to protect our client's anonymity.

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Resort spas aren't our typical client, but when we heard this unusual institution's story, we were happy to help.

The non-profit center focused on health and spirituality had gone through a rough time because of a food-borne illness incident when they found our website and called.

THE SITUATION: A food safety consultant had already found the source of the incident, an improperly used and unclean vegetable processor. But management wanted more – a review of all aspects of their dining operation to ensure they wouldn't have this problem again.

WHAT WE FOUND: We spent three days on-site observing the operation. True to its promotional materials, all foods served are prepared from scratch using fresh, raw ingredients, much of it locally sourced, following healthful recipes.

The source of the problems was an absence of competent management.

The menu is primarily vegetarian; only chicken and fish (once a week for each) are included.

Meals are served to as many as 450 residential guests, plus up to 100 day visitors three meals a day, seven days a week.

Service is much like a college residents' dining hall, with two long buffets holding a wide selection of hot and cold foods and salads.

Behind the scenes, things were not bliss-ful. The now-abandoned vegetable cleaner was not the only unsanitary source of potential food-borne illness and other risks.

A former office, converted into a makeshift "cold room" with insulation panels pasted to the ceiling and walls, with mold showing at the seams, was used to hold deliveries of raw chicken and fish.

Food purchasing was decentralized, with the fresh produce bought in excessive quantities, leading to spoilage and waste.

The operation was overstaffed: 22 cooks, five bakers and 34 dishwashers and utility workers, full- and part-time. The result was an excessively expensive operation.

The source of the disorganization and inefficiency was divided and weak management.

A personable executive chef planned menus. His cooking classes were popular with guests. But he paid little or no attention to the goings-on in the kitchen.

The utility staff was in the hands of a separate manager who also was responsible for most non-food purchasing and administrative tasks. They were cooperative with each other but oversaw separate organizations. Both delegated their responsibilities to 20 hourly employee supervisors and "lead" workers, effectively insulating themselves from blame for any problems: "George should have taken care of that."

WHAT WE DID: Our 40-page report documented all the shortcomings we found and recommended changes to ensure an improved, efficient, cost-effective service producing better meals.

The key to a permanent improvement, we said, was the appointment of a professional dining service director.

Other recommendations:

- A thorough wall-to-wall cleaning of food production facilities.
- Reorganization of food production with the executive chef taking a direct role in planning and the actual work, reporting to the new director.
- Restructuring of the service manager's position with more direct, active supervision, also reporting to the new director.
- A retraining of all personnel in proper food safety procedures.
- A one-third reduction in the hourly staff would not hurt meals, service or sanitation.

To provide them with an idea of how an efficient service works, we took the institution's senior managers to visit a Clarion independent school client that served some 1,000 resident students, faculty and staff.

They were surprised at how a wider selection of freshly prepared meals could be produced with a smaller staff, but the clincher was the dishroom. Four employees were handling a larger workload than the 12 to 14 workers at a meal in their dishroom.

THE OUTCOME: We participated with management in recruiting a new director, who came from a management position at a large state university dining service.

While the search was proceeding, a Clarion senior associate stepped in as interim manager. Over the course of four weeks, he implemented many of our recommendations.

With the new director in place, the balance of our recommendations can be implemented and an improved service will become an asset to the institution and its guests.

CLARION'S ROLE: Our knowledge and experience enabled us to find solutions to problems management, not versed in dining service, could not see or know how to resolve.

Our associate began the reorganization while the search for a director progressed and stayed on to help the new director get started.

Now, the director can complete the reorganization.